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South District bids farewell to Wham, Quarles assumes command

KANDAHAR Airfield, Afghanistan – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District-South bid farewell to its commander of the past year, Air Force Col. Ben Wham, and welcomed its new commander, Army Col. Vincent Quarles, at a change of command here July 12.

Army Maj. Gen. Michael Eyre, USACE Transatlantic Division Commander, presided over the ceremony.

Speaking before an audience of South District service members, employees and other guests, Eyre praised Wham for his service – not just as South District commander – but as an Air Force officer over a distinguished 26-year career.

“Col. Wham and Col. Quarles represent the very best the Air Force and the Army have to offer in engineer leaders,” he said. “They also represent the efforts and capabilities of so many others – the civilians and military personnel of the Transatlantic District-South.”

“Colonel Wham did a super job, leading a team of more than 400 professionals in executing a multi-billion dollar construction program to support the transition strategy for Afghanistan,” the general said. “With Ben’s guidance and keen insights, the district has been able to build an even greater, more robust, quality U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contingency organization – one that is better able to meet the overall mission requirements through demonstrated engineering and construction expertise.”

After assuming command of the district July 8, 2011, Wham and the South District completed 66 projects valued at \$444 million dollars. The district is supervising 218 ongoing projects valued at \$2.4 billion and will undertake 64 additional projects valued at \$992 million in the next two years, Eyre said.

The district can be proud of its road, public health, transportation, water and power projects, and its partnerships with battle space commanders, U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of State and Afghan agencies, Eyre said.

“It has been nothing short of stellar,” Eyre said. “When all construction is completed, the facilities to support more than 350,000 Afghan Army and National Police personnel will reinforce their capability to provide security and stability throughout Afghanistan.”



(From left) Col. Vincent Quarles, incoming commander U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan District - South, Maj. Gen. Michael Eyre, USACE Transatlantic Division commanding general, Air Force Col. Benjamin Wham, outgoing commander and Command Sgt. Maj. Lorne Quebodeaux, district command sergeant major, render honors during change-of-command ceremonies held on Kandahar Airfield July 12. (USACE photo by Karla Marshall)

Before introducing Quarles, Eyre challenged the audience to remember the Transatlantic Division's MATT imperatives: Mission, Affordability, Transition and Transformation.

"Your focus must remain on executing your mission, on staying affordable, and on transitioning to the post-2014 division structure," he said. "As we go through this transformation and transition period, I encourage you all to stay strong. When the mission is complete and the last project has been turned over, you will be rewarded for your faithful service."

During his introduction of Quarles, Eyre told the district's employees and service members that they will be challenged and excited by the work ahead. "With Col. Quarles at the helm, I have no doubt that the district will continue to build on its widely recognized record of accomplishments."

"Ben, you will be remembered for your spirit of service, patriotism and commitment to our nation all of which make you a great American and an outstanding commander. I wish all the best to you and your family. Vince, welcome aboard. You are joining a great team," Eyre said.

"It has been a long eventful year and I have enjoyed almost every single moment of it," Wham told the audience.

Wham said that when he arrived he set five priorities for the command: protect people, get work done, work efficiently, follow the Corps of Engineers business and work processes and have fun. He said the district team had met or exceeded these expectations.

"We have protected the personnel of this district across a multitude of outside-the-wire missions and construction in some very inhospitable locations, as well as ensuring a safe environment in which to work, rest and play across this entire district," he said.

Under his command, the district placed more than \$710 million in construction, provided work and building skills to more than 7,500 Afghan workers, trained 263 Afghan National Army public works professionals and transferred 369 facilities to the ANA for their operations, Wham continued.

"They performed splendidly as a lean organization, placing more than \$1.9 million dollars per person, higher per capita than any other district in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, while setting the division standard for affordability and execution," he said. "They established new austerity standards for Afghan National Police facilities that will ensure the constructability of projects in some of the most remote locations."

Wham also thanked the regional commanders, the district's customers, U.S. agencies and the Transatlantic Division for their support, reserving his strongest praise for his district command team, employees, service members and family.

But the mission is not complete, Wham cautioned.

"There is still much to do before we can say that our mission is complete. I know that the members of the District will continue to bring the same energy, sense of mission, purpose and dedication under the leadership of Col. Quarles," he

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said. “The district has gained a great leader who has commanded both combat engineer units and a USACE district before today and I look forward to hearing and reading about all the great things that he and this district will accomplish over the coming year.”

Wham will join his wife and two daughters in Charleston, S.C. and he will complete his Air Force career on Joint Base Charleston.

Quarles reports to the South District after earning a master’s degree in National Resource Strategy and participating in the Afghanistan and Pakistan Fellows Program at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D.C. Before attending the Industrial College, Quarles commanded the USACE Chicago District from 2008 to 2011.

“I know that delivering quality engineering projects and services here in Afghanistan has not been easy,” Quarles said. “The days ahead will be just as challenging as we work to award 50 or so new construction contracts by the end of this calendar year and place about \$800 million in construction by the end of 2013.”

Quarles said he will build upon Wham’s and the district’s successes.

“We are well positioned to get this work done due to your outstanding efforts under the superb leadership of Ben Wham during the past year,” he said. “I know we will deliver these and other requirements while taking care of each other and sustaining solid relationships within and outside of our district family.”

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